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Acknowledge thy dignity



Our Saviour, dearly beloved, was born today: let us be glad. No one is kept from sharing in this happiness. There is for all one common measure of joy, because as our Lord the destroyer of sin and death finds none free from charge, so is He come to free us all. Let the saint exult in that he draws near to victory. Let the sinner be glad in that he is invited to pardon. Let the Gentile take courage in that he is called to life. For the Son of God, in the fullness of time which the inscrutable depth of the Divine counsel has determined, has taken on him the nature of [humanity], thereby to reconcile it to its Author: in order that the inventor of death, the devil, might be conquered through that [nature] which he had conquered. And in this conflict undertaken for us, the fight was fought on great and wondrous principles of fairness; for the Almighty Lord enters the lists with his savage foe not in his own majesty but in our humility, opposing him with the same form and the same nature, which shares indeed our mortality, though it is free from all sin. . . . Let us then, dearly beloved, give thanks to God the Father, through His Son, in the Holy Spirit, Who "for His great mercy, wherewith He has loved us," has had pity on us: and "when we were dead in sins, has quickened us together in Christ," that we might be in Him a new creation . . . Let us put off then the old man with his deeds: and having obtained a share in the birth of Christ let us renounce the works of the flesh. Christian, acknowledge thy dignity, and becoming a partner in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct. -Leo the Great (c. 400-461), from Sermon XXI, Feast of the Nativity (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume 12*)

Election reflections



Editor's note: What follows are two reflections on the recent U. S. election, one sent the day before the election by the associate editor to those in his congregation who subscribe to his email list, the other written the day after the election by the editor.

We serve an eternal kingdom

Elections are difficult for pastors. St. Paul said, "No soldier gets involved in civilian affairs; he wants to please his commanding officer," which means that those of us serving the Lord by serving the church as pastors do so pretty much regardless of the context of country or government. The nations come and go; we serve an eternal kingdom. No matter who wins this or that election in this or that country, pastors who are doing their job will continue to

preach Christ and him crucified. The church will endure in any political context and nobody would respect a pastor who mistook his own nation's and his own era's context for the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, there are specific issues that do relate intimately to our public witness. We do not proclaim an irrelevant truth. Our message about the nature of humanity and the dignity of life is not some private hobby; it is a claim about reality, and we've been called upon as citizens to help shape our government's approach to those realities in concrete ways. You lose the moral authority as a spokesman of the church to rebuke unjust laws later if you didn't say anything on the subject when you actually had a vote.

What is the pastor's duty?

The quandary for pastors, then, is this: to what degree do we encourage people to vote a certain way or even let it be known which we intend to vote? Every congregation contains Republicans and Democrats, and most pastors are also one or the other. Therefore all Christians need to be able to attend a church in which the pastor disagrees with them politically and every pastor needs to be able to minister to people of both parties. If you couldn't go to a church where the pastor wasn't of your political party, you might want to ask yourself whether it is really church you are going to or whether it might be more like a club or a rally. But when emotions are high we do tend to have difficulty respecting someone who votes against our candidates, who supports what we're trying to defeat and vice versa. There's a good reason people are cautious about bringing up politics.

Therefore, many pastors feel they ought to "do their civic duty" and vote, but they don't let it be known how they voted lest that become a barrier in ministering to the portion of the congregation that voted the other way. That is one valid way of handling it. Some pastors go so far as refusing to vote at all lest they get too involved in civilian affairs, so to speak, rather than keeping focused on the eternal things, which might be taking the point too far. Other pastors very overtly support causes and candidates lest they be accused of abdicating the responsibility of leadership and shying away from the public witness to the truth, which is another perfectly valid way of handling the conundrum in many contexts. In the vein of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John the Baptist,

and a host of other faithful servants of Christ, they view speaking out on justice and moral issues as an intrinsic part of their calling to serve the eternal Truth.

A pastor to all

As for me, I have tried to avoid initiating political conversations, but when invited to give my opinion I have shared it. On Facebook, for example, I often comment on the political stuff other people post, but I try to avoid posting anything political myself. I avoid posting on politics because I am a pastor to Democrats and Republicans and I don't want to alienate anyone from the church for any merely secular reason. But I also comment on others' political posts because I am a pastor to Democrats and Republicans and part of that leadership role is giving guidance as best I can even on worldly things, be it about marriage and family, finances, or even politics – all the awkward biggies. Nobody is obligated to take my advice, but one aspect of being a pastor is to give counsel to those who might want it.

So on this day before the election I simply have this to say. If you do not plan to vote, well, that is your right as a citizen but I think you're missing out on a gift, a blessing we enjoy as a nation that we ought not throw away. If you have already voted, please know that your vote doesn't affect your relationship to me or to anyone else at Faith Lutheran Church. We are a congregation of Obama supporters, Romney supporters, and even non-voters. Shoot, we'll even let Bears fans come here as long as they're not too obnoxious about it.

Preaching on Sunday

If you plan to vote tomorrow and do not care one way or the other what I think about politics, that is fine, too. I'm not a called and ordained political advisor, so cast your vote as you see fit. But if you plan to vote tomorrow and you would indeed appreciate my input or would take into account my deliberations and example, then know that I intend to vote tomorrow for Romney and hope you will too. But more importantly, I plan to preach on Sunday to people who voted for Obama, people who voted for Romney, and people who didn't vote at all, and I hope to bring an eternal gospel to everyone who comes – to those who are disappointed and dispirited with the election results, those who are feel-

ing elated and triumphant about those same results, and everyone else in between. We are members of a mystical body of every tribe and nation and even every era and generation. So please come on Sunday and participate faithfully in something eternal that transcends it all.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

The day after

It's finally over, the long 2012 election, and not a moment too soon, in my opinion. I found Pastor Speckhard's reflection quite interesting and helpful, though his political views are not mine. If I didn't expect to be retired before the next presidential election, I'd file it away for future use.

I had an early doctor's appointment on election day, and that meant I had to go even earlier to the polls. I love going to the polls. It is the moment when I feel most patriotic — way more patriotic than I generally feel listening to the national anthem being sung at a ball game by some bozo who should have stayed in the cocktail lounge.

In my neck of the woods, close to half the electorate votes by mail. Not me. I want to go physically to the polling place in my neighborhood, walk into that voting booth and fill out the ballot. I may well live to see the day when they don't let you do that anymore, when they require voting by mail or maybe by computer. If that happens, we will have lost something precious and taken one more step toward individualistic anonymity that allows us to vote our personal prejudices with impunity. I like the accountability of signing in and voting along with a bunch of other people, and I'm proud to take and wear the little "I voted" sticker they give you.

The inconvenience of citizenship

Is it inconvenient? Sure. But citizenship should be inconvenient. It's a small cost to pay for the privilege of participating in democracy. (Besides, I like the fact that California requires polling places to have "public inspection" copies of the voter rolls for that precinct. I enjoy taking time to look through them and find out the political persuasions of my neighbors. Also to find out their names.)

I always marvel when I go to vote that this whole system even works. There was a lot of talk this year about voter fraud (more talk than warranted, in my opinion). I think a bigger potential prob-

lem is poll worker ineptitude. Yesterday I had to pass through four different check points (one to direct me to the right table, one to have me sign in, one to give me a ballot, one to help me feed the ballot into the machine after I'd voted). At three of the four, the person who was supposed to help me was busy chatting with someone else and that someone else had to point out that there was a voter there to whom they needed to attend. It's almost enough to make me think about volunteering to be a poll worker. Almost.

We in California were blessedly spared a presidential campaign this year. We're not, after all, Ohio. I don't think I saw a single ad for either candidate, except those being shown as part of a news broadcast about campaign ads.

On the other hand, I did receive plenty of telephone calls about other candidates or issues. I even received two — two! — telephone calls from people wanting me to vote one way or another in some New York legislative race (hard to do when you vote in California). I'll be relieved to get back to just the robocalls asking me if my carpets are dirty.

Becoming more sanguine

I've become considerably less agitated in recent years over the question of who wins or loses. I have my opinions, of course. I happen to live in a community and serve a congregation where my opinions are not the majority view. Prior to the election I heard a lot of hysterical comments from people who thought the world was going to end if President Obama were re-elected. Of course hysteria is not partisan; my children and their friends supported Obama, and one threatened to move to Canada if Romney won.

I understand that feeling, but my perspective has changed. I've now voted in eleven presidential elections. Five times the guy I wanted to win did win; six times he didn't. At least two of those six times, I was pretty much certain that Western Civilization was about to end, but it didn't. So I'm rather sanguine about elections generally. You win some, you lose some. That's the way our system works. No matter who wins, you pull up your socks, pray for our elected officials, and keep advocating for what you think is right.

It's not always easy, of course. My new congressman was named prior to the election by *The*

New Republic as one of five probable winners whom it described as “whacky, offensive, and just plain mystifying.” But we voters get to make that choice, and somehow the Republic muddles on.

Pray and vote and pray

I don't particularly agree with my colleague Peter's decision to tell his congregation how he planned to vote, but I don't disagree very strenuously. I think that's a judgment call, and in the context of what he wrote, I don't find it offensive. Pastors have a vocation as citizens, and while we should be cautious about how we fulfill it, there's no “one size fits all” standard. We should feel called, however, to find ways to elevate discourse, to discuss issues rather than personalities, to vote

our convictions, to reassure our congregations (and ourselves) that what happens is ultimately in God's hands, and to recommit ourselves, come what may, to pray for those in authority even (maybe especially) if we didn't vote for them.

There's a fine prayer in the *Lutheran Service Book* section on prayers for the civil realm, and I commend it to you: “Lord, keep this nation under your care. Bless the leaders of our land that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to the other nations of the earth. Grant that we may choose trustworthy leaders, contribute to wise decisions for the general welfare, and serve you faithfully in our generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Christmas Eve homily: A tale of three crèches



The local Episcopal congregation has a custom on the second Sunday of Advent called the “blessing of the crèche.” People bring from home their own crèches and set them up in the fellowship hall so that everyone can enjoy them. Then a prayer of blessing is said over them, asking God to bring the joy of Christ into each home represented.

At our house, though, we'd have trouble deciding just which crèche to bring, for we have several of them—some of them complete, others only partial, containing a character or two from the gospel story. Let me tell you about three of them.

Oberammergau

The one that has been our Christmas centerpiece for many years comes from Oberammergau in southern Germany. As you may know, every ten years the people of Oberammergau stage an elaborate passion play. It goes on for several months, and hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world come to see it. My wife and I were there in 1990, and we, like many of the tourists, decided to purchase a crèche. That region of Germany is known for its sophisticated wood carvings, and so many shops in the small village offer nativity figures crafted by local carvers.

Prime shopping time is during the two hour

lunch break that is taken in the middle of the rather lengthy passion play. And what is remarkable is that in the shops, behind the counters, you will find the villagers, still in costume, whom you have just seen on stage in the passion play. Here is Simon Peter, or Mary Magdalene, or Pontius Pilate—these bigger than life Biblical characters into whose drama you have been drawn all morning—but here they are, ordinary people, shopkeepers, artisans, waitresses.

Ordinary people

When we unpack that crèche each year, I think about those people, those ordinary people. It is a powerful reminder that the world into which Christ was born was a world of ordinary people. We idealize the characters of the drama in our minds—the steadfast Joseph, the faithful and willing Mary, the eager shepherds. But they, too, were ordinary people.

“I wonder as I wander out under the sky/ how Jesus the Savior did come for to die/ for poor, ordinary people like you and like I.” That's the point, you see: It was *among* those ordinary people that Jesus was born, and it was *for* us ordinary people that he came: for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. “To you is born this day a Savior”—ordinary you. He came for you.

The Asian angel

There is another crèche that has an honored place in our home—or, I should say, one small part of a crèche. This story begins many years ago, before Lois and I were married, though I was already acquainted with her family and had spent one Christmas in their home. At Christmas time Lois's mother had angels all over the place, and angels from everywhere. German angels from their time in Germany, African angels, Latin American angels, Palestinian angels—each of them, in its own way, exquisitely beautiful.

But I noticed that there were no angels from Asia. And so when I had an opportunity to visit the mountain kingdom of Nepal, I decided that I would go looking for an angel to bring home to Mrs. Solberg.

Turned out, though, that the Christian population in that largely Hindu country was negligible, and there were no angels to be found. On sort of a whim, I asked a friend who was a missionary there if she knew where I might find an angel. "Well, yes," she said, "as a matter of fact I do." She told me the story of a mask shop in a village a few kilometers from Kathmandu. Masks are big in the Hindu religion, and there are many shops which sell papier-mâché or ceramic masks.

A Christmas card

It seems that this shop owner had a relative who had emigrated to America some time before. This relative, adopting American customs, had sent a Christmas card back home, and it happened to be one that displayed a nativity scene. There is a story in Hindu mythology that bears some resemblance to that of Jesus' birth, and the shopkeeper, being unaware of Christianity, thought that's what the card depicted. And so he took it as a model and began to make ceramic versions of the figures on this Christmas card.

My friend told me how to find this village. I rented a very old and beat-up bicycle and rode out there. The shop was easy to find—for there, displayed for all to see, was a multitude of the heavenly host, along with Joseph, Mary, Baby Jesus, and others. I picked out an angel, paid the man a few rupees, and carried it back to my hotel and then home to the United States, where I presented it to Lois's mother.

The ugly angel

The only problem was that, unlike the rest of her collection, this angel was kind of ugly—clunky, gaudily dressed, looking like something from a very cheap import store. Mrs. Solberg accepted it graciously, however. And then the first Christmas Lois and I were married, she wrapped it up and sent it to us as a gift. The angel is still ugly, but she hangs above our mantel every year.

And we love her precisely because she is so plain. When I unpack her each year, she reminds me that the world is often an ugly place. Our sanitized nativity scenes—they don't communicate the reality of that stable, the smells, the cold, the discomfort. That stable was not a very lovely place—like our world, at times. Like our lives, so often. And yet into that unlovely setting came Love Incarnate. George Macdonald wrote a wonderful Christmas poem which begins: "They all were looking for a king/to slay their foes and lift them high./Thou can't a little baby thing/that made a woman cry." Yes, it is into our sometimes ugly world of tears and pain and poverty, into our lives of tears and pain and poverty, that the Christ Child comes.

The smuggled Krippe

There is another crèche in our home. It is old, but it has only recently made its appearance with us. It belonged to Lois's parents, and we have inherited it. Like the Oberammergau crèche, this one is German—but more rustic. It has a remarkable story.

The Solbergs served in post-war Germany for several years, helping with reconstruction and refugee resettlement. Part of that time was in Berlin, which of course was a divided city. When it was time for them to come home, they were presented with this gift. It had been stashed away in an office in East Berlin for several years. Back in 1950 Bishop Otto Dibelius, at that time a leader of the German Lutheran church, had been invited to visit the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, and this crèche—or *Krippe*, as the Germans say—was to be carried by the bishop as a gift to the Patriarch. But Bishop Dibelius had recently visited London, and in a sermon there he had sharply criticized the communist government of East Germany. As a result, the invitation to Moscow was withdrawn and the *Krippe* sat, still in its box, in the church office in East

Berlin.

The church officials wanted to give it to the Solbergs, but in that tense time it was almost certain to be confiscated by the communist officials at the checkpoint. How to get it home to West Berlin? And so it was that during the next few weeks at the Solberg house in West Berlin the doorbell would ring. There would be a stranger, who would say, "Herr Doktor, I have something for you." And out of his pocket he would produce a carved Wise Man, or a shepherd, or an animal, or a member of the Holy Family, until after several of these visits, each figure had been successfully smuggled across the border and the *Krippe* was complete.

The secret stair

I quoted the opening of George Macdonald's poem, but it is the end of it that I love best. "My how or when Thou wilt not heed,/but come down Thine own secret stair,/that Thou may'st answer all my need,/yea, every bygone prayer." There is a web site called "Public Christian"; I have no idea whose site it is, but in one entry this poem is presented, fol-

lowed by a non-poetic paraphrase: "You are not paying attention to my instructions as to when or how You should show up. You have your own secret stairway into my life, down which You come in order to meet my massive need of You, and even fulfill the deepest longings of my past." <www.publicchristian.com/?p=354>

That about says it, doesn't it? Who would have suspected that when Quirinius was governor of Syria, in the time of King Herod, on some night when the world in solemn stillness lay, that *God* would come among us? And who would suspect that in the midst of our complicated lives, in our busy lives, in our sinfulness, in our boredom or despair, that God would come to us? Yet that is what he does, again and again and again, down his own secret stair. Just when we least expect it, there is a knock at the door of our heart, and a warm voice: "I have something for you." And what he has is not a carved wooden figure; what he has is himself, for us. Given to us. Born for us anew this night and every night.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Slo-mo schism



A couple of issues back, I noted that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was being quite slow in posting congregational statistics for 2011. Usually these figures have been available by the summer of the following year; this time they were kept under wraps until October (after the Conference of Bishops meeting — could there be a connection?). You actually still have to poke around a bit to find these figures; the web page that offers "ELCA Membership by Year" still doesn't report 2011.

One can understand why the ELCA would prefer not to give too much play to the figures. In 2011, the church body had a net loss of 212,903 baptized members (4.98%). That is partly due to a loss of 370 congregations. If we try to put the best construction on it, we could say that the membership decline was somewhat less than in the previous year, when there was a net loss of 270,349 members (5.95%). The loss in congregations, however, was somewhat greater last year than the 340 in 2010.

Nothing to celebrate

In any event, a loss of nearly half a million members and over 700 congregations in a two-year period is nothing to be celebrated. Indeed, it seems it is nothing to be mentioned. Presiding Bishop Hanson has plenty to say about all kinds of issues, but unless I've missed it, he hasn't commented publicly on the membership loss. He did issue a statement in August celebrating the 25th anniversary of the ELCA, noting that in 25 years the denomination has started 435 congregations. He didn't say anything about losses; but then the statistics for 2010 weren't out yet, so maybe he didn't know that more congregations have left in the past two years than the ELCA has started in the last 25.

If the Conference of Bishops discussed the membership decline at its October meeting, there was no mention of it in the ELCA News Service press release about that session. Bishop Hanson did tell the bishops that the church is "always being made new." I guess that's one way to put it.

The statistics are perhaps even more striking if you look at a longer range. At the time of its official beginning in 1988, the ELCA had 5.25 million members in 11,120 congregations. At the end of 2011, it had 4.06 million members in 9,484 congregations. That's a net loss of 1.19 million members and 1,636 congregations.

More than demography

Of course most Christian churches in the United States are declining, for a variety of reasons. It is not too hard to see that the ELCA's precipitous losses in the past two years are due to more than just demographic shifts. The ELCA is, in the words of Luther Seminary history professor Mark Granquist, experiencing a "slow motion schism." From a historical point of view, this is unusual. American Lutherans are no strangers to division, but more often the divisions have been dramatic and official, with entire synods formally dividing, or with large numbers of congregations walking out together.

This one is more subtle. In recent years several new Lutheran church bodies have formed, largely from former ELCA congregations. The two largest, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and the North American Lutheran Church, have between them now about 1,000 congregations; it would probably be fair to say that most of the 700+ congregations the ELCA has lost in the past two years have affiliated with one or both of these two church bodies.

But slow motion or not, Granquist is right to call this a schism.

Unhappy in our own way

Lutherans are not alone in this. Leo Tolstoy famously wrote that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And so it is with churches. Other church bodies in the United States are facing schisms—slow motion, dramatic, or potential, and generally connected with theological issues related to human sexuality.

The Episcopal Church has lost some entire dioceses in the past few years, and recently faced another crisis when the Diocese of South Carolina threatened to withdraw. In previous instances the Episcopal Church has maintained that the departing groups were not, in fact, the "diocese" but simply renegades who had left the diocese. The denomina-

tion has then appointed a new bishop and other leaders who claimed to be the real diocese.

The situation is a little more complicated in South Carolina, since that diocese is older than the denomination itself. It was one of the original nine dioceses that formed the Episcopal Church in 1790. The national church has filed disciplinary charges against the South Carolina bishop, to the evident fury of many clergy and laity in the diocese. How this scenario will play itself out is not yet clear; a diocesan convention was to be held in November to consider formally its relationship to the national church. It promises to be a very ugly situation, whatever happens.

Methodist divorce?

Meanwhile, even the United Methodist Church may be in for a schism. As *Forum Letter* reported in September, the UMC is one of the few mainline Protestant churches that has not changed its traditional position on homosexuality. This is largely because the UMC is a global church, and as Methodism in the global south grows while Methodism in the United States does not, the overseas conferences have an increasingly powerful voice in the General Conference.

But now Dr. Jack Jackson, a professor at Claremont School of Theology, has proposed a formal division of the United Methodist Church. In an article published in the unofficial but widely-read *United Methodist Reporter*, Jackson argues that "out of missional necessity, and in the light of the denomination's continued decline, it is time for a conversation to begin on an equitable split of the UMC." There is no solution, he says, "to our theological quandary" (meaning "the stalemate over human sexuality").

Historically speaking, Methodists (like Lutherans) have had their share of schisms, and perhaps another one is coming. Dr. Jackson seems to think it could happen with civility, sort of a "friendly divorce" due to "irreconcilable differences." That doesn't seem very likely to me. Even friendly divorces are seldom as friendly as they claim, and when you throw property, pensions, and power into the mix, you've got a recipe for disaster.

But at least Dr. Jackson had the courage to speak up. It would be nice if someone in the leadership of the ELCA could acknowledge that we're in

the midst of this “slow motion schism” – and maybe reflect on how we got here, what it all means, and what the future might hold. I know that might put a bit of a damper on the 25th anniversary celebration,

but it might also lead us to confession and prayerful consideration about whether we’re really on the right track.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Questions, questions • Metro New York has become the latest ELCA synod (at least to come to our attention) advertising events for “spouses and partners of pastors.” You will recall that the ELCA statement approved in 2009 refers to publicly accountable lifelong monogamous relationships. The revision of *Vision and Expectations* published after the ELCA’s decision to accept as pastors persons in same-sex relationships suggests that the “public accountability” part for an ordained minister in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender (PALMS) relationship includes recognition and support of the relationship in his or her ELCA congregation and compliance with state law recognizing such relationships if available in the state where he or she resides. New York is a state that permits same-sex marriage. So why, in the Metro New York Synod, is it necessary to say “spouses and partners”? Wouldn’t we expect that pastors in a same-sex relationship would marry their partner, thus making him/her their spouse? Is partner now going to be a term to describe any sexual partner, married or not? Are there pastors, gay or straight, who don’t really want their relationships to be publicly accountable, for whatever reason, and is that OK? Are disciplinary charges going to be

brought if a pastor in a PALMS relationship declines to marry his/her partner, even if living in a state that permits it? If a pastor can decline to marry his/her same-sex partner, can a heterosexual pastor decline to marry his/her opposite-sex partner with impunity? The ELCA is not alone in grappling with these questions; when same-sex marriage became legal in New York, the Episcopal bishop of Long Island gave partnered gay clergy a deadline by which he expected them to wed. But perhaps the real question is whether the ELCA is, indeed, grappling with these questions at all, or has it just thrown up its hands and said, “Oh, whatever. Do whatever you want, as long as you don’t frighten the horses and your congregation doesn’t care.” That’s kind of what it feels like at the moment.

Some coming excitement • ELCA Secretary David Swartling has announced he does not wish to serve another term. That will at least mean there will be some excitement at the churchwide assembly next summer. Candidates, take your positions.

Last chance • It’s not too late to order the *Forum* package for Christmas giving! You can do it online at www.alpb.org.
– roj

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